

Remarks by Ambassador Robert F. Cekuta
Baku, Azerbaijan
Iftar Dinner
July 13, 2015, 21:00

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to my house this evening for Iftar. Haji Fuad, excellencies, distinguished leaders of Azerbaijan's religious communities, government officials, and diplomatic colleagues, thank you for joining us to mark the holy month of Ramadan.

Our annual U.S. Embassy Iftar binds us not only with Muslims in Azerbaijan and the United States, but also with more than 1.5 billion Muslims around the world. There are, I should note, around 2.6 million Muslims in the United States, a number which is expected to grow to 6.2 million, nearly two percent of the population, by 2030.

Ramadan has been a part of America for over 200 years, beginning with President Jefferson's sunset dinner for Tunisian diplomat Sidi Soliman Mellimelli, the first Muslim envoy to the United States. The United States deeply values the friendship it has built since with the Muslim world, an important friendship which we expect can only continue to grow.

Since arriving in Azerbaijan, I have learned about many things Azerbaijan can offer to the world. One such thing is the example of tolerance and the history of people of different religions living together and respecting each other. Few countries can claim centuries of multiple religions co-existing peacefully as they do here in Azerbaijan, and Azerbaijanis should be proud of this heritage and look to share this experience as an example for others.

But while the history of tolerance is important for showing others in the world that there is a better way, it is important, as I think we have learned as well in the United States, to work to instill this value in our youth. It is not enough to have a strong and proud history. We need to work to make sure good traditions are carried forward. News reports from so many parts of the world show the tendency towards violent extremism, even in places where there had seemed to be strong histories of coexistence. We owe it to our ancestors, to ourselves, and to our children to work to make sure traditions of tolerance remain vital and are perpetuated.

The Quran teaches love and compassion for every human being, regardless of his or her religion. Only by practicing these very qualities can we truly move forward together and overcome adversity in a turbulent world. The presence of people here this evening of different faiths and nationalities marks a determination to move forward, to carry forward Azerbaijan's tradition of tolerance and not to take it for granted. So in the spirit of love, compassion, and tolerance, I welcome you to this Iftar.

May God bless us all. Ramadan karim!